



Invitation for submissions on early childhood care and education

The Department of Education and Skills is inviting submissions from all interested parties (childcare practitioners, students, parents, early childhood employers, etc) on the education and training programmes that lead to qualifications in early childhood care and education.

The purpose of this review is to ensure that such education and training programmes provide childcare practitioners with appropriate competencies, knowledge and skills to support the educational development of children in early years services including full and part-time care, sessional services and childminders. While recognising that the care and education of young children should be provided holistically, this review is particularly focussed on children's educational development.

The review does not include programmes that lead to qualifications as a primary teacher.

A submissions template, in the form of a number of key questions, is attached. You are invited to provide your views on each question. There is also a space at the end of the template for any other more general comments.

All information provided in response to this questionnaire will be treated in the strictest confidence and will not be used or shared for any other purposes.

The deadline for return of submissions is **10 April 2015**. The completed template can be returned by any of the following means:

- Completed on-line through survey monkey [details to be inserted]
- Completed electronically and emailed to: earlychildhood@education.gov.ie
- Sent by hardcopy to the following address: Tony Gaynor, Floor 2, Block 2, Department of Education and Skills, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1.

Any queries on this questionnaire, or the review, can be directed to Dr. Tony Gaynor, Early Years Education Policy Unit at (01) 8896402 or tony_gaynor@education.gov.ie

Template for submissions

Your name:

PLÉ: the National Association of third level institutions offering degree level training in Early Childhood Education and Care

Contact email address (if applicable):

Chairperson: mary.moloney@mic.ul.ie

Secretary: jan.pettersen@dit.ie

How would you best describe your role in relation to Early Childhood Care and Education (e.g., childcare practitioner, student, parent, academic, employer etc).

Academic body comprising various Higher Education Institutions within Ireland

Outlined below are 16 questions related to early childhood care and education. You are invited to provide your feedback on each question. There is also a space at the end for any other more general comments you may wish to make on the issue of early childhood care and education.

1. What do you see as the main purpose of early childhood care and education?

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provides children with their first experience of a learning environment outside of their home settings. Its purpose is to nurture children, to foster a love of learning, and to lay the foundations for lifelong learning. It provides an opportunity for children to socialise and learn from and with their peers and other adults. It facilitates children in active learning within learning environments of ‘dispositional milieu’ (Carr, 2008, 2012). For some children ECEC represents their first engagement with the social world beyond family.

2. What do you see as the main benefits of early childhood care and education?

There are many benefits of early childhood education and care. These can be summarised under the following overarching areas:

1. Children and families: ECEC enables children to develop the skills and dispositions that are required for lifelong learning (NCCA, 2009). Moreover, economists (e.g., Heckman, 2006) hold that participation in ECEC leads to greater school retention at all levels within the educational system. Thus, ECEC serves as both a preventative and early intervention measure for children at risk of dropping out of the education system.

2. Economic and Social benefits: Research evidence indicates that ECEC results in benefits to the economy and to society. According to Heckman and Rout (2013) “preschool investments affect the cognitive and non-cognitive skills of the children and hence their lifetime permanent earnings and school outcomes’ .The economic benefits accrue through greater

parental involvement in the labour market, thus leading to increased contributions to the national exchequer. Greater school retention results in reduced costs to the Government in remedial education/measures at a later point in a children's schooling.

3. Increased social cohesion and inclusion may be considered a softer but equally important benefit of ECEC. Opportunities provided by a quality early years experiences within the framework of a national curriculum, where universal access operates, can ensure that all children, including those who may be considered "at risk", will benefit.

3. What are the main strengths currently associated with early childhood care and education provision?

The development and publication of two practice frameworks: *Síolta* (CECDE) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) are strengths of the present ECCE system. As a result, ECEC is based upon common core principles of early childhood learning and development, and crucially, play is recognised as the key mechanism for learning in early childhood from birth to six years (NCCA, 2009) in addition to a focus upon holistic child development (DHC, 2000, NCCA, 2009, CECDE, 2006). Moreover learning is not compartmentalised but is intended to follow and build upon each child's particular needs and interests. However, it should be noted that although the intention is evident in policy, this does not necessarily represent the practice reality.

The free pre-school year in ECCE scheme (FPSY) has made early childhood education and care accessible to all children in the year before they start school irrespective of circumstances. This approach should also be seen as a positive development in society as a first genuine opportunity for integration of children from different social-economic backgrounds.

In terms of the current ECEC workforce, the presence of a committed community of early years educators, is an asset on which to build future developments.

The diversity of ECEC in terms of approach, philosophy and provision may be considered as positive in terms of parental choice as well as the diversity of children's experiences within ECEC settings. In this respect, a unique aspect of current provision is that a one size fits all approach to ECEC is not the norm, and there is considerable flexibility in terms of how educators determine and prioritise activities based upon their specific knowledge of the children accessing their particular setting.

4. What are the main challenges currently associated with early childhood care and education provision?

While the practice frameworks represent the vision for quality in ECEC provision, there is no comprehensive implementation plan which considerably weakens their impact upon practice and ultimately, children's experiences in ECEC settings.

The designation of ECEC in Ireland as being "experience rich and qualifications poor" poses an obvious challenge. It is widely acknowledged that early years educators with the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding are a crucial aspect of quality ECEC provision (EU, 2011; Nutbrown, 2012; Tagumo, Ineke & Kelly, 2012). Moreover, Nutbrown (2012, p.

15) states that educators with higher levels of qualifications, have the greatest impact in terms of curriculum and pedagogical leadership, as well as “measureable improvement in children’s outcomes in early literacy, social development, mathematics and science”. Yet in Ireland, with the exception of the FPSY, the minimum qualification level has been established as QQI Level 5. Pobal (2013) reported that only 12.5% of staff working in the sector hold a Level 7 (4.9%) or Level 8 (7.6%) qualification. This is far below the CoRe (2011) recommendation that at least 60% of the workforce should be trained to this level.

Not only is the ability of educators to attend to the needs of children influenced by their level of education and training, it is also impacted by external factors such as their work environment, salary and work benefits (EU 2014). In fact the EU (2014) suggest that working hours and wage levels can contribute to make employment in the sector an attractive option. In the fourth quarter of 2012, the average industrial wage in Ireland rose to €828.88 per week, the equivalent of €43, 101.76 per year (Central Statistics Office 2013). A recent study undertaken by Mary Immaculate College (2015) indicates that only 10% (n=3) of the 2013 BA ECCE graduate cohort and 14% (n=5) of the 2014 cohort reported salaries upwards of €30,000. The majority of graduates; 65% (n=20) in 2013 and 60% (n=21) in 2014 reported salaries upwards of €20, 000. This is a significant challenge in terms of motivating staff to work in and to remain in the sector. Indeed this 2015 study confirms a trend identified by Moloney and Pope (2013) that graduates are being lost to the sector in Ireland.

In full day care services early years educators work a 39/40 hour week. All of this time is spent working directly with the children. Likewise, early years educators in sessional services do not have recourse to ‘non-contact time’ to enable them to reflect, evaluate and plan for children’s learning.

The continued lack of curricular/pedagogical continuity between pre-school and primary school is a challenge that warrants attention. A school readiness report undertaken by MIC and DIT (2014) indicates that many pre-schools are operating like scaled down versions of primary school. This may have arisen due to a lack of communication between the two learning contexts with resultant inappropriate expectations of young children by both sectors (MIC/DIT, 2014)

A further challenge is directly related to the current regulatory regime within the ECEC sector. While the proposed involvement of the DES in the inspection process and a resulting focus on quality early educational experiences and effective pedagogy is welcomed, a dual inspection is considered unhelpful, and will add to the layers of administration and disruption associated with multiple inspections to which the ECEC sector is already subjected; including inspections by Tusla, the EHO, the Fire Officer, Pobal, NERA, and in the future the DES.

Ireland has long had a ‘split system’ of ECEC, with early education for 4 and 5 year olds (and some 3 year olds, e.g. through Early Start) in primary schools, and childcare for younger children in a range of centre-based and home-based settings. The effect has been a large divide between provision for 4-5 year olds and under-4s in quality requirements, public investment and status. Another ‘split-system’ can be found in the divide between services

for children of different social-economic status and backgrounds. The state is providing part funding for HSE, community and voluntary services, resulting in an affordable solution for those who cannot afford private childcare. One direct result from the practice of not funding private childcare, is that the state is re-generating the divide that exists in society between the so-called 'working class' and the 'middle class'. Worryingly, a further split is now emerging between children in the birth to three age cohort, and children aged from three to six years as a result of the current focus and investment in the Free Pre-School Year Scheme, and the manner in which the proposed involvement of the DES in the inspection of services is being operationalised. It is also important to point out that the term 'Free Pre-School year' is inaccurate and misleading, as the ECCE scheme only lasts for 38 weeks for individual children. As a result, parents who are working for 52 weeks of the year must pay for the 14 weeks that are not covered by the ECCE scheme.

In relation to the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of the ECEC sector, progression pathways have been identified as requirements by the Work Force Development Plan (2010), although obstacles such as lack of flexible delivery and funding mechanisms remain a major deterrent. Coupled with this, the overall poor salary levels outlined earlier may prevent and indeed hinder participation in further education and training.

Children who attend Early Education settings should be presented with positive role models of both genders (Brodie, 2015). However, the number of male workers in the Irish ECEC sector remains below 1% and there is a well established link between low rates of pay and a low representation of men (Brodie, 2015; Cameron, Moss, and Owen, 1999), but Moss (2000) also points out that the cultural expectations can be an even bigger barrier for recruiting men to the sector.

5. What actions, if any, are required to address those challenges?

It is critical that both *Síolta* and *Aistear* are mandated by Government through the enactment of legislation. These frameworks should and must become the 'gold standard' of ECEC practice – standards that exceed the current minimum standards enshrined in the Childcare (pre-school services) Regulations, 2006. Joint pre-service and in-service education of early childhood educators and infant class teachers must also be considered so as to realise and effect a shared understanding of *Aistear*, shared pedagogies, and ultimately over time curriculum continuity for all children. Implicit in this recommendation is the need to devise new implementation strategies for *Síolta* and *Aistear* in order to reduce the time it takes to implement the frameworks within the settings.

All future funding must have criteria attached, so that settings that are not implementing *Síolta* and *Aistear* do not receive Government funding unless they engage with these frameworks. However, appropriate support must be put in place in order to allow staff to engage with the implementation procedures in a meaningful way. For example through a wider roll out of 'Better Start' and non-contact time for staff.

The inspection process within the ECEC sector must be realigned to take account of the implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear* (based upon the enactment of both initiatives by

Government). There should not be any need for alternative national standards, if there is a willingness by government to claim the Aistear/Síolta platform, and mandate both ECCE settings and the inspectorate to adhere to these in their practice. It is deemed essential that the composition of inspection teams comprises personnel with a strong early childhood background i.e. with extensive expertise in the study of early childhood and appropriate experience in the early years. Significant investment in the sector is vital to achieving the objectives outlined

A transparent system which acknowledges attainment in quality provision would help to counteract some of the inhibiting factors outlined under challenges

The issue of attracting more men to the sector is a cost neutral issue that the DES should explore, as a more balanced representation of men and women will have positive outcomes for children.

6. What are the key competences, knowledge areas or skills that are required to support children's educational development in early years settings?

Knowledge of: Play (indoor and outdoor), child development; early childhood curricula; teaching and learning strategies for young children; child health; working with families and communities; oral language and communication development; second language acquisition; child psychology; Special Educational Needs; Cultural diversity and inclusion, national policies and priorities

Competences: Child observation, communication at multiple levels, reflection, curriculum planning (incorporating Aistear), implementation and evaluation, report writing; curriculum differentiation; development of individual development plans for children with specific needs, empathy, creativity; team work

Skills: Engage in, support and facilitate children's play, storytelling, creativity (music, dance, art etc.), changing nappies, feeding, checking temperatures, administering medication

In addition, as we move to an evidence informed profession (evidence gathered through research) practitioners need to understand the various research processes, be skilled as social researchers and also be able to make sense of research-based articles and research reports. Therefore, inclusion of 'research-literacy' should be incorporated in all training programmes.

7. Are there any additional competencies, knowledge areas or skills that should be included or expanded within existing education and training programmes that lead to early years qualifications?

The answer to this question depends upon the early years qualification. It is not possible that programmes pitched at QQI Levels 5 and 6 would cover all of the areas outlined above. However all of the areas can be expanded upon incrementally over a three year and four year degree in early childhood education and care.

The successful implementation of the Aistear and Síolta frameworks are critically hinged upon the practitioner's ability to engage in reflective practice. Therefore, the reflective

process should be acknowledged as a core competency with regards to 'fitness to practice' and consequently, standards should be identified for this area and training programmes should be required to ensure that students have gained understanding of how to employ reflection practices to an appropriate level.

8. How well do current education and training programmes that lead to qualifications in early childhood care and education adequately prepare childcare practitioners to support the educational development of children in early years settings?

Again the answer to this question is dependent upon the nature and type of education and training programme. QQI Level 5 and Level 6 programmes provide a basic foundation and introduction to the fundamental aspects of early childhood education and care. However the delivery of these programmes are inconsistent and do not prepare students for the breadth and depth of experiences required within early childhood settings as outlined earlier. For example with regards to their understanding of the theoretical underpinning of national policies (CECDE, 2006; NCCA, 2009) which dictates a child-led approach with opportunities for children to engage in sustained self-directed learning. The reality is often the opposite (Pettersen, 2012), a product oriented, teacher directed approach.

Degree level programmes with a strong practicum component can adequately prepare early years educators to support children's educational development in early years settings. They also equip educators to become curriculum and pedagogical experts in early childhood education and care. Degree level programmes are also designed to prepare graduates to become reflective, thereby increasing the chances of producing practitioners committed to ongoing learning and professional development. Additionally, over time, such graduates may also be well placed to mentor, induct and support colleagues within the sector, creating a community of practice leading to enhanced quality and benefitting children in their experiences of ECCE.

9. What are your views on the quality of the education currently provided to children in early years settings (not including infant classes in primary schools or Early Start)?

While many settings provide quality early childhood education and care within their settings, quality is sporadic rather than the norm in settings in Ireland (Moloney, 2011, 2014). Some settings have engaged with the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme and the Síolta in Aistear pilot programme. The recent establishment of Better Start, the national mentoring service will also help to enhance the quality of ECEC provision within selected settings.

The variety in provision and qualifications makes it extremely difficult to make any general authoritative statement on quality. This is exacerbated by the inspection system which is based on achieving minimum standards of compliance, and which operates on a deficit rather than a strengths-based approach to inspection (Moloney, 2011, 2014). There is no apparent reward for providing beyond the mandated minimum requirement. However, a strengths-based approach moves away from a preoccupation with guaranteeing minimum standards, to maximising quality by pulling standards up through a ceiling (Braithwaite et al.

2007, p. 318). In a system dominated by private provision with very limited state investment, it is not surprising that quality is mixed.

10. What are the main factors that impact on the quality of education provided to children in early years settings?

There is no doubt that low qualification levels and lack of training impact upon the quality of education provided in early years settings. For example, in their evaluation of an initial implementation of Síolta QAP in 134 services from 2009 – 2010, Goodbody Economic Consultants (2011) found that staff education and training levels impeded their ability to engage with and implement Síolta. Early years educators' working conditions and poor pay are also a factor in the quality of educational provision. As mentioned earlier, there is evidence that highly skilled graduates are being lost to the sector and are seeking employment in more prestigious careers including teaching (Moloney and Pope, 2013).

The Síolta implementation process is way too cumbersome

There is an absence of a culture of continuous reflection for improvement and ability to capture learning from professional experience as would be expected where professional in-house supervision and mentoring is not the norm.

11. What steps are necessary to further strengthen the quality of early childhood care and education?

It is essential that both Síolta and Aistear are enacted by Government so that their status changes from that of 'Framework' to mandatory requirement. Alongside this, there must be a national fully funded implementation plan. In 2010, the DES (2010) highlighted the need for career paths and progression routes within the sector. Consequently, the development of a strategy where at least 60% of the early years sector will hold a graduate qualification (CoRe, 2011) by 2020 for instance, and differentiated pay scales for educators with differing qualification levels must be considered.

While PLÉ welcome the proposed DES involvement in early years inspections, we suggest that a single integrated inspection system is critical to quality improvement. We are also concerned that with the focus of government investment firmly directed towards children availing of the Free pre-school scheme and the concomitant increased qualification requirements for educators working directly with children in the scheme, that there is an emerging disregard for children in the birth to three cohort. This matter requires urgent attention at a policy and practice level. Ultimately, sustained state investment is required to underpin a quality sector.

12. How important are the following in supporting children’s educational development in early years settings?

	Very important	Important	Not very important	Not at all important	Don’t know
Aistear, the curriculum framework for early years education	√				
Síolta, the national quality framework for early years education		√ current implementation process is too time consuming			
The quality of education and training that lead to early years qualifications	√				
Qualified childcare practitioners	√(However, we need to define what is meant by qualified)				
Continuing Professional Development / training for childcare practitioners	√				

13. How valued by society/parents and guardians is the contribution made by childcare practitioners to children’s educational development?

Very valued	
Valued	
Not valued enough	√
Not at all valued	

14. What do you think is the most appropriate minimum qualification level for childcare practitioners?

B.A. (Hons.) ECEC, Level 8 for managers and room leaders.

QQI Level 6 for all staff.

15. What should be the main priorities of the Department of Education and Skills in relation to early childhood care and education in the next 5 years?

Ensuring that the ECEC sector is a graduate-led workforce

Investment in training and upskilling to level 8

Enactment of *Síolta* and *Aistear*

Establishment of an integrated inspection system comprising inspectors with qualifications and experience in early childhood education and practice outside of the primary school system.

Ensuring ECEC in Ireland is inclusive.

16. Is there a need for a professional standards body that promotes and regulates the childcare profession (similar to the role played by the Teaching Council in relation to the teaching profession)?

Such a body would have a role to play in the professional development and regulation of the sector. It need not necessarily be based on the model of the Teaching Council but should represent and validate the unique characteristics of ECEC. However, it is critical that should consideration be given to the establishment of such a body, that investment levels in the sector must be redressed so that educators at all levels have career pathways and progression routes within the sector. In the absence of a solid foundation, any professional body established to promote and regulate the sector will flounder.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your contribution is much appreciated. Space is provided below in case you wish to make any additional comments

1. The DES should be consistent in its use of terminology. For example, PLÉ members have discussed and agreed to use the term Early Childhood Educators for professionals who holds a B.A. in Early Childhood Education and Care/ Early Childhood studies (Levels 7 & 8), who work in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector, replacing the 30-odd terms currently in use, including the terms 'Teacher' and 'Early Years Practitioner'.

Perhaps it is also time to revisit and redress the terms 'for profit' and 'community not for profit sectors'. In this regard, there is much to be learned from the situation in Northern Ireland where the terms 'Voluntary' and 'Independent' are used. We suggest that these more positive and appropriate terms are adopted in the Irish context.

2. The DES should address the challenges experienced in endeavouring to implement an Early Childhood Education approach in Junior and Senior infant classes; chiefly the adult-child ratios in infant classes. Junior and Senior infant classes are defined as an Early Education initiative, but adopt Primary Education ratios, which differ significantly from the ratios in the Pre-School regulations. And, DES should strongly consider giving teacher status (at junior and senior infant class level) recognition to graduates of BA ECEC degree level 8 programmes.

3. The DES should consider giving teacher status (at junior and infant class level) recognition to graduates of BA ECEC degree level programmes.

Submissions should be returned by e-mail to earlychildhood@education.gov.ie or by post to Tony Gaynor, Floor 2, Block 2, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin 1 by close of business on **10 April 2015**